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URBAN ENCOUNTERS: PERFORMANCE AND MAKING URBAN WORLDS

ABSTRACT

IN RECENT YEARS MOMENTUM HAS GATHERED BEHIND RESEARCH ACROSS THE SOCIAL SCIENCES THAT EMPHASISES THE ORDINARY AND UNSPECTACULAR WAYS IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE TOGETHER IN CITIES, AND MUCH OF THE FOCUS HAS CENTRED ON AN INTELLECTUAL EXCITEMENT ABOUT URBAN ENCOUNTERS. THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES AND DEVELOPS HOW URBAN ENCOUNTERS HAVE BEEN THEORISED AND MOBILISED ACROSS THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN RESPONSE TO TALK OF CRISIS AND FAILURE OF LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE IN CITIES. SITUATED IN THE CONTACT ZONE BETWEEN SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCIPLINES LIKE GEOGRAPHY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND SOCIOLOGY AND ARTS PRACTICE, THE ARTICLE ARGUES FOR performative and more POLITICAL THEORISATIONS OF SPACES OF ENCOUNTER.. FOCUSING ON PHOTOGRAPHER MAHTAB HUSSAIN'S (2017) PROJECT YOU GET ME? THE ARTICLE EXAMINES HOW PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS OFFER ONE EXAMPLE OF A PERFORMATIVE ENCOUNTER THAT TAKES UP AS A POSITION IN THE POLITICS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE by carving out spaces where difference might be encountered in new ways, and by challenging viewers to imagine and enact new ways of being-in-common.

URBAN ENCOUNTERS

Urban life takes shape through encounters. This may seem like a banal, or even obvious, observation but it involves a profound epistemological shift in how cities are seen, theorised and understood (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Pausing to reflect on the encounters that take place in the course of daily urban life brings into view the textures of urban experience. Through the lens of encounters the city becomes a shifting terrain of unfolding social relations, orderings, exclusions, histories, and dreams. These encounters involve all kinds of meetings between people that give shape to social relations and orderings: the discomfort of negotiating bodily proximity on public transport systems; the familiarity of daily congregations at the school gates; the friendly chatter and accommodations of regulars in cafés; the bad-tempered navigation of rush hour traffic; the humiliation visited on bodies marked out as suspicious by law enforcement agencies; the generosity, hospitality and mutuality witnessed in food banks; the violent reproduction of social norms through sideways looks, vicious words or physical attacks. And it is not only encounters with other humans that give shape to urban life. The city is composed through encounters with (and increasingly between) the more-than-human materialities of the city. Infrastructures and technologies disappear into the background of the city, routinely overlooked or experienced as an inconvenience. Urban life is ordered and shaped through daily encounters with all kinds of things from the electricity grid to park benches, from turnstiles to the chips in mobile phones, bank cards and other forms of identification, from drugs to newspapers. Encounters with these technologies, infrastructures and objects play profound roles in mediating social relations, shaping social formations, regulating access, performing exclusions, smoothing and blocking mobility. Cities are also made in encounters with atmospheres, rhythms, structures of feeling, soundscapes and ghosts, dreams. Encounters with these often invisible, but felt qualities of urban life give shape to the buzz of city streets at carnival time, the drudgery of the daily grind, the cruel optimism of dreams of the good life, the petty tensions between neighbours, reputations and stigmas that hang heavily over some urban places.

The recognition that encounters give shape to urban life and public cultures of cities is, of course, not new. The history of urban sociology is peppered with attempts to make sense of the effects of encounters between strangers on the shape and quality of social relations in cities, as well as the effects of crowds, speed, visual information and noise on the states of mind on people living in cities (Amin 2008; Sennett 1992; Simmel 2010; Tonkiss 2005). Social collisions between strangers are the tissue of urban civic cultures and in recent years there has been a surge in intellectual excitement about urban encounter, particularly as momentum has gathered behind research that emphasises the ordinary and unspectacular ways in which

people live together in cities (Amin, 2002; Back, 2007; Back and Sinha, 2016; Laurier and Philo, 2006; Noble, 2013; Vertovec, 2007; Wise and Velayutham, 2009). Much of this research seeks to intervene in popular discourses that represent cities as unequal, fragmented, and exclusionary. In the context of talk about the crises and failures of living with difference in cities, research on encounters documents the ongoing and routine ways in which people share and negotiate urban space, and identify sites where forms of conviviality might be propagated and nurtured (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008; Swanton 2010a; Wilson 2017a). This scholarship does important work, but it tends to frame encounters narrowly. The emphasis is on the documentation and description of physical and embodied encounters between people. The original contribution of this paper is to broaden how encounter is conceptualized. Specifically, I look to open up a tendency to prioritise face-to-face encounters and the phenomenology of everyday urban life when trying to understand the divisions and accommodations of multicultural. I sketch a different orientation to urban encounters as an object of analysis through an emphasis on how encounters with art works, representations, images and ideas shape convivial cultures and the experience of living with difference. Specifically, I examine how the work of photographer Mahtab Hussain has the potential to remake habits of sociality through a discussion of his project *You Get Me?* that offers portraits of performances of masculinity and identity by British Muslim men in working class neighbourhoods. Through Hussain's photographs, I make the argument that encounters can be understood as world-making events in ways that encourage a rethinking of research methods in the social science and recognise the potential for collaboration with artists.

My aims in the paper are twofold. First, I am concerned in opening up a focus on face-to-face interaction in research on urban encounters. Mahtab Hussain's photographs provide powerful insights into the ways in mediated encounters can shape how multicultural is experienced, navigated and contested. In *You Get Me?* Hussain stages encounters with British Muslim men and the neighbourhoods they call home in ways that disrupt and displace patterns, habits and norms of multicultural sociality in many British cities. Whether you encounter one Hussain's portraits in the pages of his book, the wall of a gallery or on the website of a newspaper, his project illustrates how mediated encounters are important sites in the making and unmaking of urban multiucture. The arguments I make here are tied to encounters with a particular form of art work, but the arguments about the importance of mediated encounters could be extended to other kinds of arts practice, encounters with representations of all kinds, as well as encounters with ideas, ideologies, dreams...

Second, I am interested in arguing for the transformative potential of encounters. In particular, I draw on recent writing on the force of representations in cultural geography (Anderson, 2018; Barnett, 2008) and research on performative encounters (Kangieser, 2013), to argue that encounters with art works can have powerful effects on the organisation of experience in multicultural places. In part, my argument mirrors a renewed concern with representations in cultural geography (Anderson, 2018). Cultural geography has a rich tradition of analysing the material and symbolic violence of representations, and how representations produce and reproduce unequal power relations along lines of race, class and gender (Jackson, 1989; Jackson and Penrose, 1993). However, more recent work in cultural geography suspends what had become an interpretative impulse, and shifts focus to what representations *do* by examining 'the material-affective liveliness of images, words and art works as things in the world which incite, move, anger transform, delight, enchant or otherwise affect' (Anderson, 2018: 1). Ben Anderson (2018) identifies a reorientation in how cultural geographers approach representations as an object of analysis. Rather than a concern with a 'representationalist view of representational practices' (Barnett, 2008: 189), this recent work examines the force of representations by questioning how representations take on their own life and motion in relation to the world. With these arguments about the force of representations in mind, I am interested in what social scientists might learn from arts practice, and particularly the work of artists influenced by what Claire Bishop (2006) calls the 'social turn'. Artistic interventions ranging from street theatre to photography, from dérives to installations, from inter-spaces to soundwalks, provide inspiring examples of how uncertain, playful and creative urban encounters might be crafted to disrupt, displace and engineer patterns, habits and norms of sociality. These interventions manufacture performative encounters that invite what Hynes, Sharpe and Fagan (2007:109) call an 'event in thought'. I argue that These encounters

have the potential to be transformative, nudging us away from a more interpretative mode and inspiring and activating new ways of relating to and being with Others in cities.

SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

'The term encounter implies a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict'
(Ahmed 2000: 6).

Encounters provide fertile ground for thinking about the everyday sociality of cities. Much of the fecundity of encounters is their shape-shifting qualities. Sara Ahmed (2000) evokes this ambiguity pithily in her characterisation of encounters a 'meeting which involves surprise and conflict', capturing both the confrontational qualities of encounters but also their open-ended, emergent nature. Helen Wilson (2017: 452) looks to the etymology of encounter (from the Latin *incontrāre*) to argue that the term is not an empty referent, but suggests a particular kind of meeting and relation: "...encounters are regularly read through Manichean grammars of difference, which 'perpetuate border imaginaries' that assume a lack of commonality, absolute opposition and thus crystallise logics of 'us versus them'". Encounters always already imply a particular orientation to and relation with difference, one that is often oppositional and confrontational. At the same time, the notion of encounter also engenders unpredictability and openness. Encounters have the potential to surprise. They can transgress expectations; shift normative horizons of 'us' and 'them'; and even destabilise the very 'regulatory ideas' that produce social norms (Brown 2006).

The ambiguity and tension that Ahmed finds in the idea of encounter is evident in writing on urban encounters and multicultural (Back, 1996; Back and Sinha, 2016; Gilroy, 2004). Encounters are deployed to open up analytical orientations to social difference in cities that move beyond the 'social arithmetic' of urban diversity evident in talk of the (super-)diversity of cities (Back and Sinha 2016: 521; see Vertovec, 2007). The concept of encounter becomes a rallying point for research that seeks to get to grips with, and make sense of, what Doreen Massey (2005) called sites of 'throwntogetherness' where social differences are made, negotiated and contested. Throwntogetherness is a wonderfully suggestive term that captures the sense that cities are destinations and meeting places. Cities attract and together people from different parts of the world with different histories, biographies and journeys; who embody or subscribe to different social and cultural identities; who express multiple forms of attachment and belonging; who occupy different class positions (Leitner 2012).

Much of the research seeking to understanding the throwntogetherness of urban life comes under the umbrella of geographies of encounter - 'a shorthand for a body of work broadly interested in social diversity, urban difference, and prejudice, which has sought to document how people negotiate difference in their everyday lives' (Wilson 2017: 45). Les Back and Shamser Sinha (2016: 521) suggest that this work offers "a way of seeing' that is attentive to forms of division and racism, alongside and sometimes within multicultural convivialities'. An important leitmotif of research on urban encounters has been close attention to the micropolitics of everyday life (Amin, 2002; Wise and Velayutham 2009), often through ethnographies of particular multicultural places. Les Back's (1996) influential work on the lives and cultures of young people in South London neighbourhoods provides an important inspiration in the growing enthusiasm for understanding geographies of encounter. Documenting the neighbourhood nationalisms and local syncretic cultures that unsettled and re-orientated local meanings of race, membership and belonging, Back's ethnographic research pointed to the importance of everyday shared spaces like neighbourhood, youth club, or housing estate in the negotiation of relations of inclusion, exclusion and antagonism. This attention to ethnographic detail and the micropolitics of daily life has been instrumental in shaping claims about the significance of understanding prosaic spaces of urban encounter, and the identification of the ways in which spaces like evening class, sports clubs and urban gardens might offer up opportunities for negotiating across ethnic boundaries and nurturing forms of agonistic multicultural conviviality (Amin, 2002). This early work on geographies of encounter has fuelled a significant body of research that is concerned with understanding the phenomenology of everyday urban life and how social differences are experienced, negotiated and contested. One important example, is Sophie Watson's

(2006) research on city publics that explores how difference is performed and negotiated in ordinary public spaces around London that include markets, streets and children's playground. Fashioned against more abstract claims about forms of cosmopolitanism fostered by interaction in public space, Watson's research points to the messy, unruly and at times contradictory relations of that make up urban multicultural in the shared spaces of the city. And over the years the kinds of shared spaces that have attracted attention have proliferated to include cafés (Laurier and Philo; 2006); buses (Wilson, 2011); schools (Thomas, 2011); busy urban high streets (Hall, 2012); taxis (Swanton, 2010b); restaurants (Highmore, 2008) and other spaces of consumption (Wise and Velayutham, 2009).

Encounters have been mobilised in more or less hopeful ways to point to the ongoing, ordinary and unspectacular ways in which social differences are navigated and negotiated in cities. For example, there has been a turn to encounters in ethnographic research on living with difference in British cities that has been sparked by a dissatisfaction with an perpetual handwringing in popular and political discourse about segregation, cultural difference and the troubles associated with sharing urban space. Much of the work on encounters has emerged in the context of talk about multiculturalism and living with difference that is routinely couched in narratives of failure and crisis. In public discourse there is an unrelenting focus on spectacular and troubling events that include terror attacks, urban disorder and disturbance, segregation, gang violence, religious extremism and sexual exploitation, regressive and repressive practices that curtail the freedom and rights of women. Against the grain of this talk of crisis and failure geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and others have started examine urban encounters. Encounters offer a way of documenting and describing the ordinary relations, habits and feelings of urban conviviality (Amin, 2014). Encounters engender an attunement to phenomenologies of everyday social mingling and document the acts of kindness, the comfort of rhythms, the soundscapes, the ordering, the petty tensions, the ghosts, the dreams, the humdrum violence that are part of the warp and weft of the living in multicultural cities. The attunements can be seen in important research that use encounters to evoke the diversity of the gaze (Sennett, 1994); the everyday doing of living with difference in streets, cafés, taxis, buses, parks, busy markets, playgrounds, and neighbourhoods; or the importance of micro-publics for unsettling prejudices and nurturing moments of engagement or recognition (Amin, 2002).

In the remainder of this paper I focus particularly on the political possibilities of urban encounters. Some of the more hopeful claims about the political possibilities for encounters between urban strangers has been questioned, and with good reason. Gill Valentine (2008) has warned against overly celebratory claims that encounters might form a foundation for a politics of living with difference. She notes that good or positive encounters often fail to travel, and that encounters often leave attitudes unmoved, or worse still they entrench prejudices. However, the emphasis on encounters offers routes to an agonistic politics of living with diversity based on engagement and negotiation, and a welcome alternative to the existing policies that stress social cohesion based on fixed notions of common values, community and shared identifications (Fincher and Iveson 2008). My sense is that these appeals to encounter and agonistic politics are a little too comfortable. Helga Leitner (2012) suggests that 'spaces of encounter show us that categories of difference can be destabilised so that new spaces for negotiating across difference can be created'. However, the attempts of geographers and others to create these kinds of spaces often seem vague and timid, largely limited to debates about the design of urban public spaces. My frustration is that important scholarly writing on encounters misses opportunities to make more of an impression in the world. One of the reasons for this is that social scientists have tended to theorise encounters in narrow ways that focus on documentation and description for the purpose of interpretation and analysis. But if we embrace the idea of performativity, and a conviction that representations *do* things (Anderson, 2018), then we can begin to think about how the work of documenting and describing the lived experiences of urban multicultural opens up ways of being more experimental and political.

MAKING URBAN WORLDS

'Put simply, geographers don't just study geography, they create geographies'.

Trevor Paglen (2008: 31)

With an elegant simplicity the artist and geographer Trevor Paglen urges us to take seriously the claim that scholars don't just study the world. Geographers craft, fabricate and reproduce geographies and worlds. This neat shorthand captures how the production of knowledge is performative. At the same time Paglen invites creativity and experimentation, opening up a challenge to reconsider the kinds of geographies and worlds that we might aspire to make. In this article I examine how this twin emphasis on performativity and creativity offers original ways of reframing encounters and how we think about research on living with difference.

The idea of performativity is alive in much of the existing academic work on encounters. Drawing heavily on Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, research on urban encounters focuses on how processes of differentiation are performed in social interactions. For example, the idea of performativity has been central to my research that has examined the sorting and judging of bodies through moral panics, troubled the imaginative geographies of no-go areas, and traced how racial differentiation is performed through taxis and cars (Swanton 2010a; 2010b). But here I am interested in staging a different coming together of encounter and performativity. In science and technology studies the idea of performativity has been influential in shaping arguments that research needs to be understood as world-making (Mol 1999; 2002; Law 2004). This field traces processes and practices of social formation (where the 'object' in formation could be anything from a disease to an infrastructural project) in ways that are attentive to multiple realities, the significance of perspective and the agency of humans and non-humans. The labour of examining these processes of social formation engenders a sense of worlds and futures that are still-to-be-formed. Moreover, it raises the question of how realities might be performed differently.

Annemarie Mol (1999) introduces the composite term ontological politics to develop her arguments that research is always an intervention, an act of world-making. She argues:

'Ontology in philosophical parlance defines what belongs to the real, the conditions of possibility we live with. If the term 'ontology' is combined with 'politics' then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped by these practices. So the term politics works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested' (Mol 1999: 74-5).

Ontological politics poses a fundamental challenge to social science research. Mol's argument forces a recognition that research methods are never innocent or merely technical, but they involve questions of how to make things differently and what worlds should we make. In *After Methods*, a manifesto for a different kind of social science that might better deal with mess, multiplicity and indeterminacy, John Law (2004: 143) develops these arguments:

'Method is not, I have argued, a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is performative. It helps produce realities. It does not do so freely or at a whim. There is a hinterland of realities, of manifest absences and Othernesses, resonances and patterns of one kind or another, already being enacted and it cannot ignore these. At the same time, however it is also creative. It re-works and re-bundles these and as it does so re-crafts realities and creates new versions of the world'.

Social science methods are being pushed here in exciting new directions. Law is making space for more generous methods by extending what might be normally deemed appropriate as method and allowing for ways of knowing that are multiple. At a moment where space is being carved out for more creative and experimental modes of knowing, the social sciences have much to learn from working with artists.

In recent years a lively contact zone between arts practice and social science disciplines like geography, anthropology has become significant (Thompson 2008). This contact zone reflects a turn to the arts in social sciences and what Claire Bishop (2006: 178) has dubbed the 'social turn' in arts practice that is manifest in the 'recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with special social constituencies'. Departing from traditions of site-specific, 'heavy metal' public art (Kwon 2002), many artists are interested in spaces as social and emergent entities that become the focus and medium of artistic investigation. As such, artists (often working in areas variously labelled post-studio art; post-visual art, socially-engaged art, experimental geographies) respond to calls for cultural workers to move beyond critique as an end in itself, and to take up a 'position' within the politics of lived experience (Paglen 2008). My argument is that this contact zone between arts practice and social science research offers exciting opportunities for thinking anew about research methods. There is potential to develop methods that refuse to tune out messy, multiple and often contradictory realities; that communicate research far beyond the normal circuits of academic knowledge; and that involve uncertain, playful and creative interventions to empower, inform and disrupt.

Learning from, and collaborating with, a mixed panorama of arts practice - that includes installations, dérives, soundwalks, photography, social sculpture, deliberative mapping, theatre, ficto-critical writing, graphic arts, story-telling; making informal meeting places - provides a way to explore how research on encounters might participate actively in world-making to affect relations and spaces of concern (Last 2012). Rather than focusing primarily on describing encounters for the purposes of academic analysis, we might explore new ways of documenting and describing encounters in ways that play on the open, emergent and unpredictable qualities of encounters. This involves a shift in our conceptualisation of encounters in ways that activate and exploit the transformative potential of encounters. Anja Kanngieser's (2013) writing on performative encounters in the creative strategies of global social movements provides compelling examples of the political potential of encounters. She emphasises the role of performative encounters as a 'shared, creative and transitory event that is political in its focus. It is dedicated to activating new relations between people and it is affirmative of self-determined ways of living and being' (Kanngieser 2013: 8). The spirit of the Situationists' practices of *dérive* and *détournement* - practices that experimented with making worlds, relations and subjectivities outside and beyond capitalist social relations - looms large in this figuration of the performative encounter. The Situationists used tactics of shock, humour and parody to rupture everyday narratives and spark collective awakening to the colonisation of everyday spaces and rhythms by capitalist production. In this way performative encounters seek to change people's relations with their own experiences.

At the same time as making these arguments for experimentation and performativity, it is also crucial to take seriously the endemic risk that encounter as intervention presents. For example, Wilson (2017b) is troubled by the paradoxical way in which 'organised' or 'planned' encounters are promoted pedagogical and political tools that challenge and reformat habits of relating across difference, when encounters are understood by their very nature to be unpredictable. There are, Wilson (2017b) argues significant ethical and politics questions raised by the use of risky or unpredictable encounters as interventions, and questions of who is made vulnerable in these organised encounter. Alternatively, Oli Mould's (2017) research on 'creative cities' warns us that creative practice, subcultures and urban subversion risk losing their radical edge by becoming co-opted by the mores of neoliberal capitalist urban development. As such, his research provides an important rejoinder that demands that we remain attuned to how inequality and injustice is entangled in, and even reproduced through, creative practice.

Notwithstanding these critiques, performative encounters produced through arts practice provide pathways to forms of creative and communicative politics that craft new ways of being with, and relating to, Others in multicultural cities. Practices like photography, street theatre, or *dérive* offer ways of participating in the world that perform the political activism and collective work of what Ahmed (2000: 17) calls strange encounters by working 'to find ways of re-encountering these encounters so that they no longer hold other others in place'. The participatory, and sometimes playful, nature of performative encounters has the potential to subvert and destabilise existing uncongenial relations and entrenched habits of race thinking. Performative encounters also offer tactics for building alternative relations, dispositions and spaces that might become part of an infrastructure of living with difference. The scene of

an encounter has the potential to make folds in social relations; the 'swerve' of an encounter can make other things happen, it becomes the means for a new attunement, a new history (Berlant 2016).

In the final sections I examine how the work of photographer Mahtab Hussain, and in particular his project *You Get Me?*, produces performative encounters. Hussain's photographs are perhaps less spectacular and noisy as forms of arts practice inspired by groups like the Situationists. Nonetheless, his photographic portraits craft encounters with young British Muslim men in ways that call out racist visual cultures fed by negative media coverage. These portraits stage urban encounters that have the potential, I argue, to disrupt practices of looking and sorting that are entrenched in habits of race thinking; and they offer the ground for imagining new patterns, habits and norms of sociality.

***YOU GET ME?* PHOTOGRAPHY AND REMAKING HABITS OF SOCIALITY**



Photographer Mahtab Hussain's portraits capture performances of masculinity and identity by British Muslim men living in inner city working class neighbourhoods. The sitters for Hussain's portraits were all approached in chance encounters. The photographs capture the men and boys Hussain encountered and talked to on the streets of British cities. The background for the portraits is the street with backdrops including shutters, shop windows, parked cars, gym equipment, low walls, and swings. This staging of the portraits is purposeful. It both situates and amplifies the performances of masculinity and identity and how these performances are shot through with concerns about power, money, respect, and territoriality. In his photographs Hussain challenged his sitters to visually articulate what they want to say to a wider audience (The Independent 23/05.2017). The force of the portraits arrives in the ways in which they catalogue diverse performances of masculinity and identity by British Muslim men. Alongside the photographs, unattributed quotes from sitters offer viewers windows into the lives lived by young British Muslim men. Their stories, struggles, and aspirations inject vulnerability and humanity into representational repertoires that repeatedly construct these men as some monstrous Other in postcolonial Britain.

You Get Me? looks to hold media and political discourse to account. Hussain's work disrupts the dominant visual regimes through which British Muslim masculinity is produced, circulated and consumed. For example, a book produced as part of the project features a striking portrait of a young man whose piercing eyes hold the viewer's gaze (Figure 1) while the back cover offers a catalogue of headlines from the British tabloid press that index some of the many ways in which British Muslims are Othered, vilified and cast out. The juxtaposition of front and back cover is forceful. The photograph on the front cover demands a response. I find myself returning to this image, caught in this man's gaze. There's something familiar about the portrait. A young Asian man. Hair slicked forwards with gel. A patchy beard. An earring in his left ear. A kaffiyeh prayer scarf - part of the iconography of Palestinian nationalism - draped over his shoulder. The force of media representations means that this stranger is recognised (Ahmed, 2000). Recognised as Other. But even as the photograph is situated within the motifs and visual regimes that construct British Muslim masculinity as Other, deviant and threatening, it also punctures this visual regime. The portrait returns a look. There's something about the directness of this man's gaze that demands a response. It is as if there is a hard-wired response when we encounter the eyes of another human (or non-human) being. Held in this sitter's gaze, we cannot not want to know his story. Who is he? What are his hopes? His loves? His dreams? His fears? This work of puncturing and disrupting practices of looking and sorting are an important part of what Hussain's photographs want. In an interview with the Independent newspaper he frames the project as one that challenges what viewers are looking at: 'Do you see men? Are they British men, Asian men, Muslim men? Can you dare define them as fine art portraits, (because that is where I stand), worthy to hold such a little, or are they documentary, because black and brown men photographed in their own space by [a] black and brown artist can be nothing but documentary' (The Independent 23/05.2017).

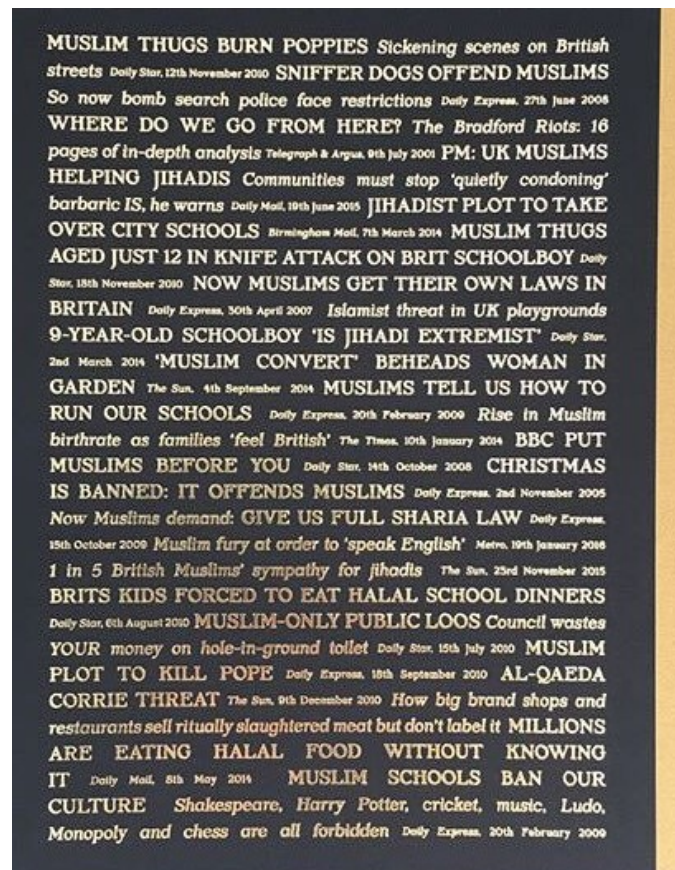


Figure 2: Back Cover *You Get Me?* Source: <https://twitter.com/mahthussain/status/883359048174796800>

One possible reading of *You Get Me?* is as a project of deconstruction. It intervenes in the image-repertoire through which British Muslim men are routinely represented. Claire Alexander (2000; 2004) has written powerfully about how moral panics about Asian gangs, and more recently 'home-grown terrorism', have made British Muslim hypervisible in the media. News media produce a near daily bombardment of negative coverage that constructs British Muslim men as terrorists, gang-members, ISIS sympathisers, and sexual predators. This coverage is accompanied by photographs of brown bodies: grainy stills from CCTV footage; police mugshots; photographs gleaned from social media or snapped in the street. These circulating photographs resemble bodies that we encounter in the course of our everyday lives. Images format perceptions and shape dispositions in ways that come to mediate encounters (Swanton 2010a).

At the same Claire Alexander argues that the hypervisibility of British Muslim men in negative coverage masks a more profound invisibility. Media representations offer very little sense of how British Muslim men are at once much more than and much less than their typecasting by the media as bad boys, gangsters, predators or religious extremists. *You Get Me?* challenges this profound invisibility of British Muslims, and the absence of people like him in mainstream media (newspapers, magazines, television, advertising campaigns, billboards...). In his introduction to *You Get Me?* Hussain writes:

'I wanted my brown people to be seen, reflected, and to be positioned in society. I wanted to walk into a museum and a gallery and see myself on a wall. And I wanted to be seen as their equal.'
(Hussain 2017: no page)

Hussain's portraits - and their circulation in books, art galleries in London and Bradford, or in the news media - begin to challenge a narrow and authoritative framing of British Muslim men. *You Get Me?* prises open spaces in which differences might be encountered in new ways. There is a politics and poetics in these photographs that acknowledges what is unseen, overlooked or neglected, while at the same time working ways of knowing and representing that seek to rewrite geographies and make urban worlds anew.

The portraits in *You Get Me?* carry a deconstructive force. The photographs and quotations intervene and disrupt; they return looks and speak back to challenge the visual regimes through which young working class men in Muslim communities are represented in the media. But these portraits are also objects in the world. They take the form of framed prints exhibited in gallery spaces; or as images printed in newspaper supplements or in coffee table books; or as pixels and digital files posted and shared via websites and social media. As objects in the world these portraits that travel and circulate have a performative force. While images always appear in some kind of material form (film, paint, toner, pixels...) a crucial feature of the lives of images is their ability to circulate from one medium to another, to move from the page to the screen, from the screen to the performances of everyday life. Introducing his examination of what pictures want, Mitchell (2005: p.xv.) argues that pictures are "ways of worldmaking," not just world mirroring'. Mitchell is interested in a poetics of pictures that explores 'the lives of images', sidestepping questions of what pictures mean or do to dwell on 'what they want - what claim they make upon us and how are we to respond?'(ibid). Mitchell shifts our orientation to pictures, and by focusing on the social lives of photographs allows us to consider the ways in which Mahtab Hussain's portraits have the potential to produce a swerve in everyday urban encounters. The photographs become 'go-between's in the social field of the visual, and everyday processes of looking and being located' (Mitchell 2005: 47).

Producing and curating portraits of British Muslim men, Hussain crafts uncertain, creative, and sometimes playful urban encounters that disrupt, displace and engineer patterns, habits and norms of sociality. Playing on motifs of swagger, surprise, machoism, vulnerability, struggle, the images call out racist stereotypes, and provide a medium for subverting uncongenial relations and entrenched habits of race thinking in British cities. I argue that these portraits stage performative encounters that explode one-dimensional media representations that transact in stereotypes by exposing the viewer to the life and liveliness of young British Muslim men. In the process, the portraits provide offers new ways of relating to others, and introduce a glitch into the comfortable habits and social norms of middle class multiculturalism. While staging encounters, *You Get Me?* also troubles habits of looking, sorting and judging difference in cities, inviting what Butler and Anthanasios (2013) call 'responsiveness as responsibility'.

Staging encounters

Hussain's portraits are staged in the settings of his sitters' everyday lives. The backgrounds of the portraits are the ordinary streetscapes of working class inner city neighbourhoods. Many of the portraits are framed by the cluttered materiality of urban streetscapes (signs, shop fronts, shutters, garage doors, low walls, parked cars, weeds and groomed hedges...), others take place against the backdrop of backyards, scruffy urban parks, gyms, boxing clubs and cars. This framing of the portraits was purposeful. It locates these men, and conveys something of the spaces in which their performances of masculinity and identity unfolds. In a very real sense, this framing stages urban encounters, and looking at the photographs will transport some viewers to unfamiliar neighbourhoods. These are neighbourhoods that some would not ordinarily venture into as their navigation of the city is contorted by popular imaginative geographies that construct them as scary, as no-go areas, as 'Muslim ghettos'.

Beyond locating his sitters through the framing of his portraits, Hussain performs the important work of exposing the deadening effects of the visual cultures through which British Muslim men are routinely encountered. Mitchell (2005: 298) argues that racial stereotypes are defined by 'precisely what they lack - life, animation, vitality'. *You Get Me?* captures some of the life and liveliness of British Muslim men's identifications, attachments and performances that is snuffed out by the mugshots or grainy stills that dominant media representations. While these men are clearly acting up to the camera - posing and dramatising particularly aspects of their daily performances - the portraits evoke the multiple, contradictory and messy lives of British Muslim men.

The portraits do not shy away from youth cultures that are entangled with moral panics about gangs. In a number of the portraits boys and young men are clearly playing up to typecasts of the big man; their performance for Hussain's camera involves projecting 'gangster swagger' expressed through a gestural economy of gait, pose and hand signals (Figure 2) that projects a confidence shaped by their social location

(Figure 2). In addition to performances that play on respect and power, there are other portraits that capture these men at work; hanging out; eating; walking dogs; working out...The portraits show the many ways in which social distinctions are performed through style. Style is manifest in the careful choice of clothing that hints to diverse attachments and identifications: many wear designer sportswear; others pose bare-chested or in vests chosen to show off their gym-honed torsos (Figure 4); one boy wears a T-Shirts emblazoned with an anti-racist slogan; another is dandy-esque in a tailored three-piece suit (Figure 5); others pair salwar kameez with hoodies and Adidas sneakers (Figure 6). Distinctions are also performed through personal grooming: cropped hair, slicked into place to shaven heads and beards. The portraits also introduce material cultures of car enthusiasm; cultures of body-image that aspire to gym-sculpted bodies (and perhaps the consumption of performance enhancing drugs); the status and respect that is earned through the ownership of aggressive breeds of dogs. The style, comportment and material cultures of British Muslim masculinity on display in these portraits are diverse and full of life. The portraits capture aspects of lives lived and stories to be told through the hybrid material cultures of these neighbourhoods. They tell stories of how status, power, and respect are achieved in working class urban neighbourhoods.

In the process the portraits stage an impasse. They introduce a glitch into the comfortable lives of middle class urban multicultural. These portraits evoke scenes of what Lauren Berlant (2011: 49) has described as 'cruel optimism', where 'we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourish to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place'. So while it's important to trouble some of the performances of masculinity and identity in the images, they speak more profoundly to forms of the vulnerability, and the daily struggles these men experience. They bring into focus relations of living on in relation to crisis, loss, and hardship. Hussain forces home how these visual performances often mask vulnerabilities, wounds and struggle by including quotes from the men who sat for him. Many of which dwell on their representation in then media after 9/11. These portraits suspend normal ways of relating and making sense. They attune us differently to situations, perhaps retraining affective responses.

You Get Me? Responsiveness as responsibility

Alongside staging encounters, *You Get Me?* uses vulnerability, surprise, pain, struggle, alongside amplifying projection of identity and masculinity to question of practices of looking and judging. The portraits invite a shift in the visual culture of public life in cities. The images operate as 'go-betweens' in the social transactions as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure encounters with other human beings (Mitchell, 2005). *You Get Me?* offers a catalogue of images that might introduce new ways of relating to, and being with, difference in British cities. These portraits trouble, subvert and short-circuit the representational repertoires produced and circulated by negative media coverage of British Muslims. Encountering these young British Muslim men offers an 'event in thought' (Hynes, Sharpe and Fagen 2007: 109). The portraits stage encounters that have the potential to spark public imaginations and conversations, infusing cultural narratives and identities. They haunt us; they trouble imaginative geographies, they destabilise some cultural narratives and produce others. Rather interpreting what these portraits represent or mean, we need to analyse how these images ask questions of the viewer. They trouble ways of looking and entrenched habits of race thinking that shape disposition and mediate urban encounters.

When he was transcribing the interviews he recorded with the men that sat for him, Hussain writes that he was struck by the repetition of the phrase '*You get me?*'. He notes that the phrase is a Black expression, and how the appropriation of this vernacular highlights the connections to, and identifications, with a Black urban experience among many young British Muslim men. In particular hip hop and references to poverty and the struggles of urban life resonate with many men living and growing up in urban working class neighbourhoods. But there is an ambiguity to '*you get me?*' that Hussain is keen to play on. It can be seen as aggressive, even confrontational. But it also betrays vulnerability. *You get me?* speaks to sense of ontological insecurity. A sense of being misunderstood and misrecognised. Do you really understand me? Do you know where I am coming from?

You Get Me? refracts a more routine questioning of belonging and location that shape the lives of British Muslim men. The repetition of questions like 'Who are you?' and 'Where are you from?' leave an impression, dislocating bodies that are repeatedly constructed as out of place and related to elsewhere. And so, *You Get Me?* can be taken as an expression of assertiveness. It is an assertion of identity and location that challenges an unequal 'apparatus of recognition' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 64). It calls out tolerance as a discourse of power that manufactures unequal positions between tolerating and tolerated. It challenges how tolerance stratifies and abjects some people from rights and equality without disturbing the norms of whiteness that marginalise in the first place (Brown 2006). The assertiveness of *You Get Me?* calls forth what Butler and Athanasiou (2013: 104) have called 'responsiveness as responsibility'. Responsiveness is understood as a disposition towards others (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 105). This demand for responsiveness provides the ground for a precarious relationality and new possibilities for being-in-common:

"taking responsibility for one's own position in the world and relationality to other. We might consider what kinds of enabling spaces of politics open up on occasions where we find ourselves affected, undone and bound but others' calls to respond and assume responsibility. In a world of differentially shared sociality, if we are already "outside ourselves," beyond ourselves, given over, bound to others, and bound by claims that imager from outside or from deep inside ourselves, our very notion of responsibility requires this sense of dispossession as disposition, exposed, and self-othering' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 105-6)

The power of Hussain's portraits lies, then, not only in staging encounters, but also in the ways his portraits demand a response. And in demanding this response they force open new ways of relating to, and being with, others in multicultural places.

CONCLUSION

'The core idea at the heart of experimental geography is that we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us'

(Thompson 2008: 7)

Recent research on encounters has provided significant insights into the experiences of living with difference in cities, and how social differences are performed, negotiated and contested. However, much of this work dwells on documentation and description that is targeted primarily at academic analysis. As a result social scientists pass up opportunities to think and experiment more imaginatively and politically with spaces of encounter. The significance of the paper resides in the argument for a reframing of urban encounters based on an insistence that social science research does not simply describe social relations; it helps to create them. Recognising that research is performative, and looking to a vibrant contact zone between the social sciences and arts practice, I have argued for notion of encounter that emphasises performativity and creativity. Making a case of thinking more expansively about encounters - and research more broadly - I have argue that social scientists have a lot to learn from the many methods that artists use to intervene in urban life, and unsettle experience in ways that alternative stories and histories. Collaborating with, and learning from, arts practices provides spaces, methods and tactics for producing performative encounters that might unsettle social norms and entrenched habits of (racialised) sense-making. Performative encounters have the potential to spark public imagination, catalyse political contestation, and produce engaged publics.

Mahtab Hussain's project *You Get Me?* provides an example of how encounters produced through photographs comprise open spaces in which differences might be encountered in new ways. There is a politics and poetics in Hussain's photographs that acknowledges what is unseen, overlooked or neglected, while at the same time working ways of knowing and representing that seek to rewrite geographies and

make urban worlds anew. Hussain's photographic practice responds to Walter Benjamin's call for cultural workers to move beyond critique as an end in itself, and to take up a position in the politics of lived experience. Playing on motifs of swagger, surprise, machoism, vulnerability and struggle, the images call out racist stereotypes, and provide a medium for subverting uncongenial relations and entrenched habits of race thinking in British cities. These portraits stage encounters that inject the life, personality and liveliness of British Muslim men at a time where media coverage reduces them to caricatures. At the same time, I argue that his images challenge an unequal apparatus of recognition that shapes practices of looking and judging difference. *You Get Me?* demands a responsiveness from viewers that engenders precarious relationality and new modes of being-in-common.

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Figure 3: No title. Source: Mahtab Hussain



Figure 4: No title. Source: Mahtab Hussain

Figure 5: No title. Source: Mahtab Hussain

Figure 6: No title. Source: Mahtab Hussain